

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

by Antony Loewenstein

22 November 2019

I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land throughout Australia and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. I pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

I'm truly honoured to be here, my more than 15 years of work on the Israel/Palestine conflict recognised in front of so many friends, colleagues and comrades in the struggle. I'd like to thank the Jerusalem Peace Prize committee, Sonja Karkar, Stuart Rees and Nasser Mashni, for giving me this prestigious award and the various Palestinian groups represented here who keep the issue of Palestinian human rights alive.

I also want to acknowledge my father, Jeffrey, who has been unwavering in his support of my work. Both he and my mother, Violet, who sadly died three years ago, paid a steep personal price for supporting the Palestinian cause. Perhaps predictably, many in the Jewish community have no tolerance for any hint of sympathy for Palestinians, preferring to label them terrorists and a threat to Jewish self-determination. This is the bigotry and racism that I continue to fight on a regular basis.

Finally, I'm indebted to my partner Ali, our boy on the way and our toddler son Raphael Gideon – yes, we picked Gideon after one of our heroes and friends, the Israeli, Jewish journalist Gideon Levy who weekly and for decades has documented the corrosive effect of Israeli occupation on Palestinian lives. My dear family gives me strength, love and courage amidst the horrors that I've witnessed in my work from Palestine to Afghanistan to Nigeria.

We live in occupied East Jerusalem and barely a week goes by when I don't see an armed Israeli soldier or policeman harass or humiliate a Palestinian man, woman or child near my home. As an atheist Jew – I don't believe in God but feel culturally connected to the dissenting traditions of my religion – I've long despaired at the depths to which the self-declared spokespeople of the Jewish faith, from Rabbis to Zionist leaders, have defended the now 52-year occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights and justified or denied the Zionist massacres of Palestinian innocents at the birth of the Jewish state in 1948. It's inexcusable and makes me ashamed to be Jewish.

And yet ever since I wrote my first piece for the Sydney Morning Herald in 2003, headlined, “Defiant Israel blind to what it has become”, in hindsight a remarkably mild article that called for a two-state solution and decried the pernicious influence of the Zionist lobby, I’ve witnessed the growth of Jewish opposition to what’s being done in our name in Palestine.

Think about the constant Israeli house demolitions of Palestinian homes, extremist Jewish settlers physically throwing out Palestinians from their homes, I’ve witnessed this myself in East Jerusalem, the predictable onslaughts against the besieged people of Gaza and the creeping annexation of the West Bank where hundreds of thousands of Israeli colonists squat illegally on Palestinian land, notwithstanding the Trump administration trying to ignore international law this week by saying that they no longer regard the settlements as illegal.

These are daily realities for millions of Palestinians, often ignored in the corporate media or defended as necessary in the never-ending “war on terror”. Too often their voices are shunned. Nonetheless, I’m heartened by powerful US Jewish groups such as Jewish Voice for Peace, Never Again Action and IfNotNow and Jews Against the Occupation in Australia because they articulate the kind of Judaism and humanity that isn’t blinded by loyalty to the Zionist tribe.

These Jews, from the religious to secular, believe that adherence to the Zionist cause isn’t the only way to be a good person in the 21st century. If anything, Zionism is now associated with the longest running occupation in modern history. That’s the shameful legacy of a people who 75 years ago lost six million people including many in my family, killed by the genocidal carnage unleashed by Nazi Germany.

My first visit to Gaza was in 2009, six months after Operation Cast Lead, an Israeli massacre that killed 1400 Palestinians, many of them civilians. I wrote back then that, “the Jabaliyah area near the Israel/Gaza border looks like a nuclear bomb has wiped out any signs of life. In particular pockets, all the houses are flattened. I’ve never seen so much destruction in my life. Twisted concrete, computer keyboards, teddy bears, mattresses, plates and toys thrown randomly as if by an act of God. The Israeli God.”

Although I had already spent years documenting the Israeli occupation in the West Bank, seeing Gaza with its resilient yet traumatised people was bracing. Little did I know then that the Israeli and Egyptian imposed siege, backed by many of the world’s supposed enlightened nations including Australia, would continue into 2019, still crushing the dreams, hopes and health of two million Palestinians. The siege should end immediately.

Sometimes it can be hard to have hope when covering the Israel/Palestine conflict. Today both major political entities in Palestine, Hamas and the Palestinian Authority[AM4] , have

little legitimacy or ability to end the occupation. Many Palestinians are exhausted, determined to just live their lives, raise their families and survive. The Trump administration, backed by a feckless Australia and a handful of dependent Pacific island states, continue to defy global opinion by voting with Israel at the United Nations. Even the European Union, fond of issuing stern press releases when Israel misbehaves, is determined to maintain its ever-increasing trade relations with the Jewish state.

My personal vision is a secular one-state solution, where all citizens of the state, Jewish, Muslim, Christian or atheist, live in a democratic nation that doesn't prioritise one racial group over another. Today's Israel is a deeply undemocratic entity. Remember that five million occupied Palestinians, in the West Bank and Gaza, can't vote during Israeli elections despite the fact that the Israeli government determines which favoured Palestinians receive permits to work, study, travel and access decent medical care. There's a word for this; apartheid.

At a time of rising anti-Semitism across the globe, where synagogues are attacked and Jews are killed for simply being Jewish, it's vital to stand against all forms of hate and join in solidarity with those who are fighting for a world free of violence. We must oppose the dangerous conflation of real anti-Semitism with legitimate criticism of the Jewish state. When real anti-Semitism is rising and a serious threat to Jewish life and liberty, conflating the two is pernicious and diminishes the real dangers to us all.

Where to from here? We need to be aware of the Israeli nationalist agenda, supported by Washington and Australia, that imagines an indefinite Israeli occupation and dependent Palestinians. Just this week the former mayor of Jerusalem, the right-wing Nir Barkat, announced that his vision, relayed to the Trump White House, involved huge Israeli industrial parks employing 250,000 Palestinians while prioritising Bible tourism for evangelical Christians. Without massive outside pressure, Israel has no incentive to end its decades-long plan of control over the entire land of Palestine.

Australia could play a constructive, albeit small role, if a brave federal government severed military ties with Israel or stopped signing deals with Israeli security companies that are complicit in Israel's subjugation of the Palestinian people.

History is replete with inspiring examples of how committed individuals, groups and movements worked to end discrimination and occupation. Palestine will be eventually liberated and it will be thanks to the dedication of the Palestinian people, committed citizens, enlightened Jews and people like you in this room.

Thank you again for recognising my work. Rest assured, I've only just begun.